

Missile Myths -- I

A Soviet First Strike?

by Herbert Scoville, Jr.

Now that the US and the USSR have agreed at the highest level, to "concentrate this year on working out an agreement to limit the deployment of ABMs" and "to agree on certain measures with respect to the limitations of offensive strategic weapons," it is timely to clear away some of the myths which have been hampering success at SALT and providing fuel for the arms race. One such myth has been the widely trumpeted charges that the Russians were preparing a first strike against the US - a strategic attack on this country which would destroy a sufficient proportion of our strategic retaliatory forces that we would be either unable or unwilling to respond. If the Soviets or we came to believe that they had this capability, then our deterrent, the heart of our strategic security, would have lost its credibility. Nuclear war would have become more likely and our vulnerability to nu-

However, later, after testimony by Secretary Roger and CIA Director Helms, he retreated to the position that the Russians were acquiring the forces that would provide them with such a capability.

Although we have no way of divining Soviet intentions, we must attempt to visualize a first-strike policy from the Soviet point of view. We must remember that a first strike that is only 50 percent or even 95 percent effective is a disaster for the Soviet Union, since few - or even one - thermonuclear explosions on its cities in retaliation would be a catastrophe. Knocking out all our Minuteman missiles but leaving us with a strong retaliatory force of submarine missiles and bombers is only an invitation to national suicide. Even if all our intercontinental bombers were also destroyed by Soviet submarine missiles, we would still be left with a retaliatory capability which could devastate the USSR. Thus, if the Soviets are serious in attempting to develop a first-strike capability, they must find some way to neutralize our Polaris submarines, to say nothing of our bombers based on carriers or overseas.

While the Soviets have a modest anti-submarine warfare program, they could not have a force which could destroy the Polaris fleet in this decade or probably the next and have apparently not even made a major effort to have one. Their only protection from Polaris missiles in the foreseeable future would be through an extensive nationwide ABM system that could shoot down essentially all retaliatory missiles; yet strangely, some time before Secretary Laird announced the Soviet intention to achieve a first-strike capability, the Russians stopped the deployment of their only ABM system, that around Moscow. They have only recently, more than three years later, resumed that deployment, but they could not have in this decade, and probably never, an operational system which they could count on for protection from completely unacceptable damage from the Polaris fleet alone.

The continued Soviet construction of about 50 to 60 very large SS-9 missile launchers a year was the primary evidence used to support the conclusion that the Soviets were seeking a first-strike capability. It was feared that about 500 of these missiles, each equipped with three MIRVs (multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles); could destroy 95 percent of the US Minuteman force in a first strike. The Russians had tested the SS-9 with three reentry vehicles beginning in August 1968, and US defense authorities suggested in 1969 that these were designed to knock out our Minuteman silos. They further argued that the only logical explanation for the continuing SS-9 buildup was a Soviet desire to achieve a first-strike capability. As time passed, this assumption evolved from theory to unquestioned gospel.

But is the desire to obtain a first-strike capability the only logical explanation for the

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clear blackmail a reality. This fear of a first strike against our Minuteman ICBMs was a major factor in President Nixon's previous reluctance, (which now appears to have been partially overcome) to negotiate an ABM agreement without a simultaneous limitation on offensive weapons. [Laird said September 18 that the Russians in the last 10 months have undertaken, with "tremendous momentum," a buildup of both land- and sea-based missiles. When Laird gets specific in his report to Congress next January on the military budget, there will be, he predicts, no further talk of budget cutting, for the American people don't want to be "militarily inferior." Government officials, it is reported, say that 80 ICBM silos are being built in the Soviet Union, that the Soviet ICBMs already outnumber ours - 1500 to 1054 - and that they have or soon will have 25 operational missile-firing submarines (the US has 41). Numbers, of course, say nothing definitive about a first strike capability or intent. - The Editors]

Secretary Laird first raised the first-strike alarm in justifying the Safeguard ABM when he said on March 21, 1969 that the Soviet Union is "going for a first strike capability, and there is no question about it."